



Podcast Story: Why Do Institutions Matter?

Let us begin with the question: **Why do institutions matter?**

To answer this question, we must first ask **what institutions are**.

According to **Adrian Leftwich and Kunal Sen (2011)**, institutions can be understood in two main forms: **formal institutions and informal institutions**.

Formal institutions are **normally understood to be written laws, regulations, legal agreements, statutes, contracts and constitutions enforced by third parties**. Examples include **the constitution, government, marriage, and family law**.

Informal institutions, on the other hand, are **usually unwritten norms, customary practices, standard operating procedures, routines, conventions and traditions deeply embedded in culture and its associated ideology**. Examples include **gender assignment, gender roles, and wearing clothes**.

In other words, institutions can be understood as **the rules of the game or constraints that shape behavior**.

This idea is important because when we try to **make sense of an advocacy project based on an institutional perspective**, we are essentially examining how these **formal and informal rules structure behavior, decision-making, and interaction**.

Institutions and Development

Leftwich and Sen argue that institutions are **very important to any development project that aims to create and sustain political stability and social inclusion**.

However, institutions are not simple structures that appear automatically.

They present several key assumptions.

First, **institutions do not form overnight**.

Second, **institutions are not static**.

Third, **it takes a mountain of effort to keep institutions working.**

These assumptions support three main arguments.

Institutions are a Set of Rules and They Are Not Self-Generating

The first argument is that **institutions are a set of rules.**

These rules do not **generate themselves automatically.** They must be **created, shaped, implemented, and maintained by actors and organizations.**

This means institutions require **continuous effort** to remain functional.

If the actors who maintain institutions stop supporting them, the institutions themselves may weaken or collapse.

Institutions Are Social and Political Constructions

The second argument is that **institutions are social and political constructions.**

They are **not simply functionalist-rationalist designs.**

This means institutions cannot be understood only as technical systems designed to maximize efficiency.

Instead, they involve **actors and organizations that go beyond conventional methods of understanding institutions.**

Different actors bring their **interests, ideas, and strategies,** which shape how institutions emerge and evolve.

Institutions Are Interactions of Actors

The third argument states that **institutions are interactions of actors and are at the heart of politics.**

Organizations become **vehicles for the pursuance of individual and shared interests and ideas**.

In this sense, **organizations are facilitators of rules**.

This is why politics cannot be understood simply by studying institutions alone. One must also examine **the actors and organizations that interact with these institutions**.

Types of Institutions

Leftwich and Sen also explain that **various social and political institutions have specific functions, logics, and systems**.

They identify **three general classifications**: economic institutions, political institutions, and social institutions.

Both **formal and informal institutions** exist within these classifications.

Economic Institutions

Economic institutions deal with **the definition, acquisition, distribution, and regulation of economic goods such as property and services**.

Formal elements include **laws and policies that govern economic goods and services**.

Informal elements include **gender norms related to property ownership and class systems about access to economic goods**.

For example, even if formal laws grant equal rights to property ownership, informal gender norms may still influence **who actually acquires and controls property**.

Political Institutions

Political institutions deal with **how power is obtained, used, controlled, and by whom**.

Formal elements include **forms of government and written constitutions**.

Informal elements include **cultures of corruption and familial ties**, which shape political landscapes.

These informal practices can significantly influence how political power operates even when formal rules exist.

Social Institutions

Social institutions are concerned with **society and culture**.

Formal elements include **government regulation of social relationships and behavior**.

Informal elements include **social cohesion, inclusion, gender, generations, and religion**.

These informal elements shape everyday social life and influence how people interpret and follow formal rules.

Institutions and Organizations

One of the most important clarifications in the reading is the difference between **institutions and organizations**.

Organizations are described as **formally or informally coordinated vehicles for the promotion or protection of a mix of individual and shared interests and ideas**.

The relationship can be understood in a simple way:

- **Institutions are the rules of the game**
- **Organizations are the players of the game**

Institutions are **formal and informal rules that govern politics**.

Organizations are **groups that participate in politics**.

Although they are different, they must always be studied together because **most social, political, and economic institutions overlap**.

Therefore, how **individuals and organizations navigate these institutions** becomes a necessary point of inquiry.

For Leftwich and Sen, the success of most political projects depends on **an effective relationship between institutions and organizations**.

Institutions can only be **effectively shaped, implemented, and maintained if strong organizations interact with them**.

In other words, **strong organizations matter to institutions**.

Norms and Social Change

Another perspective in the reading comes from **Kathryn Sikkink** and **Martha Finnemore**.

They explain that earlier studies of politics focused mainly on **formal institutions** and largely ignored **ideology and culture**, which are forms of informal institutions.

However, this changed in the **1970s** with the rise of **decolonization and transnational advocacy networks** such as the **International Committee of the Red Cross** and the **World Wildlife Fund**.

Political science then experienced what is called an **ideational turn**.

This meant that society and politics began to be explained not only through **formal processes like decision-making, governance modes, elections, and bureaucracy**, but also through **constructivist ideas involving ideology and norms**.

Instead of asking only “**what works**” in a **functionalist-rationalist sense**, scholars began asking “**how does change really occur**” in a **social constructivist sense**.

The Norm Life Cycle

Sikkink and Finnemore propose the **Norm Life Cycle**, which explains how norms emerge, spread, and become accepted.

The framework has **three stages**.

Stage 1: Norm Emergence

Norm emergence occurs when **norm entrepreneurs attempt to persuade others to embrace new norms.**

Norm entrepreneurs are **individuals or groups who have strong notions of what is appropriate and desirable in their communities.**

They attempt to **convert society into something they consider desirable.**

Norms therefore do not appear **out of thin air.**

They are actively **created and promoted by actors.**

Stage 2: Norm Cascade

Once norms gain support from important actors, they enter the **norm cascade stage.**

In this stage, **norm leaders socialize other actors to become norm followers.**

Actors may adopt norms for several reasons:

- **pressure for conformity**
- **desire to enhance international reputation**
- **desire of leaders to enhance their reputation or legacy**

The key actors in this stage include:

- **states or national governments**
- **international organizations like the United Nations**
- **advocacy networks like Amnesty International**

These actors encourage the **formalization of norms and institutions.**

The process resembles **contagion**, which Sikkink and Finnemore describe as **socialization.**

Socialization involves **public debates and discussions**, recognition of actors who uphold norms, and criticism or ridicule of actors who refuse to uphold them.

Stage 3: Norm Internalization

Norm internalization occurs when norms acquire a **taken-for-granted quality.**

At this stage, they are **no longer a contentious issue in public debate.**

Examples include:

- **women's suffrage**
- **abolition of slavery**
- **immunity of medical personnel during war**

When norms become internalized, people follow them **without consciously questioning them**.

Internalized norms can be powerful because they are widely accepted, but they can also become **ambivalent** because they are no longer critically examined.

When norms become **enshrined in laws, constitutions, and contracts**, they become **rules for compliance**.

The State

Even though organizations and norms shape society, there are situations where **rules must apply to very large populations**.

This requires an institution large enough to **impose and maintain norms across society**.

This institution is the **state**.

According to **Max Weber**, a state is:

“a human community that successfully claims the monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force within a given territory.”

This means the state is the institution that **legitimately uses force to enforce rules and maintain order**.

Elements of the State

For a state to exist, four elements must be present:

1. **People**
2. **Territory**
3. **Government**
4. **Sovereignty**

Sovereignty can be **internal**, meaning the government makes decisions within its borders, or **external**, meaning the international community recognizes it as a state.

Nation and National Identity

Most modern states are described as **nation-states**.

A **state** is a **legal concept**.

A **nation** is an **ethnic concept**.

According to **Benedict Anderson**, a nation is an “**imagined community**.”

It is imagined because members **will never know most of their fellow members**, yet they imagine themselves as part of a shared community.

A nation is also imagined as **limited, sovereign, and a community**, even though inequality and exploitation may exist.

National identity often serves as **the backbone of a state’s legitimacy and symbolic capital**.

The Philippine State Structure

The **1987 Constitution of the Philippines** establishes a **three-branch government structure**.

These branches are:

- **Legislative** – creates laws and the national budget
- **Executive** – implements laws and policies
- **Judiciary** – reviews and adjudicates actions of the other branches

These branches are meant to remain **separated and co-equal** to maintain balance and prevent the monopolization of power.

The **President** serves as both **head of state** and **head of government**.

Additionally, the **Local Government Code of 1991** decentralizes power so that **local government units can make decisions independently**, especially during crises.

State Failure

Finally, the reading examines why **state-building efforts sometimes fail**.

According to **Jackson and Rosberg (1982)**, several factors contribute to this problem.

First, **ethnic divisions may become politicized**, leading to **civil conflict**.

Second, governments may emphasize a **unifying national idea** while ignoring real ethnic differences.

Third, there may be **disaffection among elites**, which can lead to **coup d'état**.

Fourth, **independent institutions capable of governance may be underdeveloped**.

To address these problems, they recommend **international exchange and involvement**, where countries cooperate to introduce **human rights standards and institutional reforms**.

✓ Core idea of the entire review

Institutions matter because they are **the rules that shape behavior, structure political life, guide organizations, influence norms, and allow the state to maintain order and governance across society**.

If you want, I can also explain **the hidden “exam logic” of this reading** (the 3–4 arguments professors usually expect when you apply this to an **advocacy project analysis**).